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SOVIET MILITARY THEORISTS  
REAPPRAISE NUCLEAR WAR

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

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FOREWORD

This memorandum surveys recent developments in Soviet strategic thinking as reflected in the writings of Soviet military officers in the Soviet public press and specialized professional journals. It assesses these developments in the light of all-source information on Soviet weapons programs and in the context of overall trends in Soviet policy. It is intended as a contribution to an understanding of the influences and purposes which are now shaping Soviet military policy.

This is the third in a series of memoranda in Soviet military policy and strategy which the Office of Research and Reports has issued since the advent of the new Soviet regime. Previous memoranda in this series were: CIA/RR MM 65-1, Soviet Military-Political Relations Six Months After Khrushchev, June 1965, ~~SECRET~~, and CIA/RR MM 66-1, The Military Issue in Soviet Policy During 1965, February 1966, ~~SECRET~~.

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SOVIET MILITARY THEORISTS  
REAPPRAISE NUCLEAR WAR\*

Summary

A new round of debate over military strategy and doctrine has been taking place in the Soviet Union over the past year. In contrast with those during the Khrushchev period, which centered largely on practical issues provoked by Khrushchev's force reduction policies, the current discussions are broader and more theoretical, and are raising questions concerning the basic assumptions that have governed the development of the armed forces since the early 1960's. They are addressed to the doctrinal and structural biases which Khrushchev's policies introduced into the Soviet military establishment, including the limitations on Soviet strategy imposed by the USSR's inferiority in strategic forces, its deficiencies in limited warfare capabilities, and its lack of capability to use military power selectively for limited objectives.

In gambling on the possibility of achieving deterrence cheaply, Khrushchev neglected considerations important to the credibility of the Soviet deterrent and to the morale of his own officer corps. He tended to forget that the capability to deter war rests on a willingness to face it backed up by an ability to fight it at various levels of intensity. The military deficiencies

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which stemmed from this oversight lie at the heart of the current discussions, and Soviet hopes for a more confident military posture depend upon their correction. Military theorists are exploring the problems of nuclear war. They are doing so, not because they believe that nuclear war has become more likely or because of a belief that the Soviet Union can now wage and win such a war, but because they believe that preparing for nuclear war is a necessary precondition for developing a credible and effective deterrent. With such a deterrent established, the doors would then be opened for the exploitation of all the options of strategy that localized superiority in limited conflict situations might afford.

Soviet theorists have also stressed the need to develop capabilities for conducting various forms of limited war, including wars waged primarily with conventional weapons or with the limited use of nuclear weapons. The acknowledgment that tactical nuclear weapons might be employed without inevitably producing general war represents an innovation in Soviet military doctrine. It is not clear, however, whether they believe that limited warfare can be conducted in Europe.

The tone and character of the current doctrinal discussions appear to reflect a growing confidence among Soviet military officers that the means to support a stronger deterrent posture and a more flexible military strategy are gradually becoming available. Statements by the Soviet leadership indicate that Soviet policy is being increasingly affected by the need to meet heavy defense requirements. There appears to be a relationship between these developments, which gives grounds for surmising that the strategic concepts which the theorists are now developing are based not on hopes alone, but on political commitments to the same objectives.

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## I. The Current Issues in Soviet Strategy

A new round of debate over military strategy and doctrine has been taking place in the Soviet Union over the past year. In contrast with those during the Khrushchev period, which centered largely on practical issues provoked by Khrushchev's force reduction policies, the current discussions are broader and more theoretical, and are raising questions concerning the basic assumptions that have governed the development of the armed forces since the early 1960's. The natural eagerness of the military professionals to settle their doctrinal scores with Khrushchev, and the hospitality which the new regime has accorded these endeavors, have undoubtedly contributed to this revival of theoretical discussion. But the main impetus has probably come from a growing confidence among Soviet military officers that the means to support a more flexible military strategy are gradually becoming available. The prospect of a strengthened deterrent capability--based on the growth of the strategic attack and strategic defense forces that is taking place in the Soviet Union--has undoubtedly fortified them in this expectation.

Although Khrushchev has left the scene of Soviet policy-making, the heritage of his policies and ideas has continued to weigh heavily on Soviet strategic thinking. In a sense, military thinkers are as much preoccupied with Khrushchev today as they were before his political demise, for the problem of finding ways to escape the limitations which his policies had imposed on Soviet strategy has been the common task of much of the theoretical writing that has appeared in the Soviet press since he left the scene.

The military establishment that Khrushchev left to his heirs was a special-purpose organization whose value as an instrument of policy tended to diminish as the United States acquired greater capabilities. It was structured and trained to serve a deterrent role, on an assumption that general war was unlikely, and that if any direct clash between the great powers occurred, it would inevitably result in an all-out nuclear war. The Soviet deterrent consisted of a very large force of medium-range nuclear missiles, targeted mainly against Europe, and a smaller force of ICBM's, aimed at the United States. Both these elements were deficient in the chief characteristic of a reliable deterrent, namely, survival capability, since during the early years of deployment most Soviet missiles were placed in "soft," unprotected sites, and hence were

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vulnerable to US strikes. Although this deficiency has been reduced by new "hard" deployment in recent years, the Soviet ICBM force has remained inferior to the US ICBM force, both in survival capability and numbers.

The structure and capabilities of the Soviet theater forces were naturally affected by the view that the main role in deterring war, or in conducting war if it should occur, would be played by the strategic forces. Soviet ground forces were reduced and streamlined to improve their mobility and their capabilities for independent action in a nuclear environment. Integral supporting elements were minimized and the required stocks and material for a rapid advance against light opposition were pre-positioned in Eastern Europe. The tactical air forces were reduced and naval building programs were revised to accord with the more limited mission assigned the Navy. All of these measures were influenced by Khrushchev's belief that he could safely divert resources from the theater forces for what he regarded as more essential military and civilian uses. The result of all this was that Soviet capabilities to use military forces selectively for limited objectives were diminished.

In effect, the Soviet military establishment under Khrushchev became the victim of a self-fulfilling prophecy. Believing that war could no longer be used as a rational instrument of policy in the nuclear age, Khrushchev gambled on the possibility of achieving deterrence cheaply. In so doing, he overlooked a factor which was important to the credibility of the Soviet deterrent and to the morale of his own officer corps, namely, that the capability to deter war rests on a willingness to face it, backed up by an ability to fight it at various levels of intensity.

The military deficiencies that stem from this oversight lie at the heart of the current discussions in the Soviet military press. The critical problems of Soviet strategy hinge upon the question of the Soviet Union's own view of its military relationship with the United States. It is for this reason, undoubtedly, that the discussions have focused on the problems of nuclear war, for it is upon the solution of these problems that hopes for a more confident posture in the military relationship with the United States mainly depend. In exploring the ways in which the Soviet Union could cope with the problems of a nuclear war, Soviet theorists have not necessarily concluded that such a contingency has become more likely. They are seeking, rather, to face the

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possibility squarely in order to find the ways in which a more reliable deterrent can be developed. With this assured, the doors would then be opened for the exploitation of all the options of strategy that localized superiority in limited conflict situations might afford.

## II. Criticism of Deterrence as Guideline of Policy

A few months after the removal of Khrushchev, while the new political leaders kept their counsel on defense questions, a gradual but unmistakable reaction to Khrushchev's policies began to appear in the Soviet military press. The reaction was marked by condemnations of "subjective" methods of policy formulation and appeals for a strengthened, more balanced defense posture based on a "scientific" analysis of the nature of war and of the requirements it posed. The keynote of the new movement in military thinking was the argument that military policy should be based not on the assumption that war was unlikely but rather on the assumption that, although unlikely, war remained a real possibility in the contemporary world.

The first and most direct assertion of this argument was presented by two well-known military figures, Major General K. Bochkarev and Colonel I. Sidelnikov, in an article in Red Star on 21 January 1965. They couched their argument in the form of an attack on unnamed comrades who, they said, stressed the "possibility of preventing war through the deterrent effect of nuclear rocket weapons, rather than giving sufficient attention to the possibility that war might occur." The purposes underlying this attack on the premises of Khrushchev's military policy were probably mixed. Considerations relating to budgetary allocations may have played a part. Indeed, this aspect of the argument was made explicit later in the year by the same Sidelnikov when he wrote in Red Star on 22 September that the tendency to overemphasize the deterrent role of the armed forces could lead to questioning the "need to spend large resources on them." Yet, it is also clear that a main consideration underlying the attack was a genuine apprehension that the capabilities of the armed forces were being diminished by the doctrinal assumption that war was unlikely.

## III. The Question of War as an Instrument of Policy

The same concern appears to be reflected in the renewed attention that has been given in the Soviet military press to the question whether war in the nuclear age can still be used as a rational instrument of policy.

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When this question was debated with the Chinese some years ago, the Soviet position was that the principle of the relationship between war and policy remained valid in theory but that the application of the principle in the conditions of nuclear war would be invalid, because the goals of policy could not thereby be achieved. Now the emphasis has perceptibly shifted. The burden of the argument now being developed in the military press (with varying degrees of rigor) is that nuclear war, like any war, is susceptible to rational control and that it can be used as an instrument of policy. Needless to say, the Soviet authors make clear that Soviet use of nuclear war would be for defensive purposes only.

Lt. Colonel Rybkin, whose article in Communist of the Armed Forces in September 1965 first raised the subject in its present form, emphasized the practical implications of the question. "To maintain that victory in nuclear war is absolutely impossible," he wrote, "would not only be false on theoretical grounds, but dangerous also from a political point of view." Rybkin did not push the argument to its logical conclusion; his article reflected a pragmatic understanding of the effects of nuclear war and a recognition that the applicability of the principle was circumscribed. But other writers following him dropped the qualifications which he retained. What they have been arguing, it is clear, is that in a world in which nuclear war was still possible, the Soviet Union should put itself in a position from which it could face such a possibility with confidence.

#### IV. Stress on Conventional and Tactical Nuclear Capabilities

The military writings of the past year have sketched only the broad outlines of the practical measures that are being proposed to translate these doctrinal injunctions into reality. One conclusion that military writers appear to have arrived at is that the Soviet Union should seek to improve its general purpose forces in order to broaden the range of options available to it in conflict situations. With increasing explicitness, Soviet theorists now speak of the possibility of prolonged conventional war and of war limited to tactical nuclear weapons.

Although indications of increasing receptiveness to the notion of non-nuclear war have cropped up in theoretical writings for several years, it is only since the change of regime that top level military figures have taken public positions sympathetic to this line of thought. The first was Marshal Rotmistrov, who in attacking the proposal for

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a belt of atomic land mines along the German border, in December 1964 voiced the curious complaint that the upshot of the arrangement would be to trigger any hostilities to the nuclear level. The implication was clear that without such devices a European war might take place on a non-nuclear level. An even more explicit acknowledgment that such a possibility was being reckoned with was given by Marshal Malinovskiy in September 1965. In reiterating the standard Soviet line that victory in war depended mainly on nuclear-rocket weapons, Malinovskiy introduced a new qualifying proviso. This would be the case, he added, "if they are used."

Acknowledgments that tactical nuclear weapons might be used in a war without triggering an automatic escalation to the strategic level are an entirely new note in Soviet doctrinal writings. A number of such statements have been made over the past year or so. General Shtemanko, for example, writing on the Soviet Ground Forces in Soviet Russia in November 1965, made the observation that these forces would play a particularly important role in wars not involving the use of nuclear weapons, "or involving their limited use only." A prominent military theorist, Colonel General Lomov, writing at about the same time in Communist of the Armed Forces, went even further in acknowledging this possibility. Emphasizing the need to prepare for the possibility of "local" wars, Lomov pointed out that such wars had taken place over the world, and could occur "even in Europe." He then went on to say that although such wars were usually fought with conventional weapons, "this does not exclude the possibility of employing tactical nuclear weapons."

The question whether the USSR envisions the possibility of limited forms of warfare in Europe, as opposed to other areas where the interests of the great powers are not so deeply committed, is still ambiguous. Lomov, in the article cited above, at least left this possibility open, although he indicated that he believed it to be an unlikely one. If the nuclear powers become involved in "local" war, he said, "the probability of escalation into a nuclear world war is always great and in some circumstances inevitable." This position, carefully calculated to take account of all possibilities, yet conscious of the need to emphasize the main threat, probably typifies the main trend of thinking in the Soviet General Staff on this question.

As the logic of the trends described above would suggest, Soviet military theorists have come to recognize that the character and duration of a future war cannot be predicted with any certainty. In

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contrast with Khrushchev's assertions that a future general war would be decided in a matter of days, Soviet writers now give greater stress to the view that a future war may be prolonged, even if nuclear weapons are employed. In the literature of the past year or so, increasing attention has been given to the need for preparing the country ahead of time for all the requirements that may be posed by a future war. From this, further specific arguments are derived: the need for armies of great strength, backed by reserves of trained personnel, plus adequate stockpiles of materiel and a capability to convert industry rapidly to a war footing.

But the increasing Soviet emphasis on the possibility that war may assume various forms does not give grounds for assuming that priority attention is no longer being given to the possibility of general nuclear war. Despite the tendencies noted above to concede that localized clashes between Communist and Western forces might take place on a limited basis and that even the introduction of tactical nuclear weapons in a "local" war would not necessarily mean an automatic escalation to general war, Soviet theorists are conscious of the fact that their capabilities to deal effectively with limited conflict situations depend upon the capabilities to prevent such situations from becoming unlimited. Thus, the main problem for Soviet military theory continues to be that of preparing the armed forces to face the threat of nuclear war. As Colonel General Lomov put it, "the main direction" in the development of the Soviet armed forces is defined by "the requirements of world nuclear war."

#### V. New Emphases in Strategic Doctrine

There has been considerable effort over the past year to flesh out the bare bones of this doctrinal assertion with practical recommendations as to how a nuclear war might actually be conducted. Military writers have been at pains to reconcile the long-held tenet of Soviet doctrine that force superiority is a prerequisite of victory with the manifest facts of the present strategic relationship with the United States. The articles offer a number of theoretical solutions to the problem of achieving superiority, based on exploitation of the peculiar characteristics of nuclear-rocket war to achieve a favorable "correlation of forces." Several aspects of modern war which are believed to offer potential advantage in this respect have received particular emphasis. None of the points made is entirely new to Soviet strategic thinking. What is significant is the emphasis that is being given to these points in the context of the general revival of strategic thinking that is now taking place.

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First, it is recognized that the USSR must be capable of detecting Western preparation for an attack. Marshal Sokolovskiy and Major General Cherednichenko, for example, writing in Communist of the Armed Forces of April 1966, observed that not only is it possible to detect in time the onset of an attack, but also the "start of direct preparation" for an attack. In other words, they added, "there is a possibility of not permitting a surprise attack." There is an implicit assumption here that Soviet strategy will be able to rely upon reconnaissance and detection techniques to recognize the threat of an impending world war. There is also an assumption that the Soviet Union will be able to turn the factor of surprise to its own advantage.

Soviet strategy could further rely, it is argued, upon a powerful strategic attack capability to exploit the advantages gained through early warning. In a discussion of "The Time Factor in Modern War," Colonel I. Gurdinin, writing in Communist of the Armed Forces of February 1966, observed that the "first massive nuclear strikes" can possibly predetermine the entire outcome of the war. Thus, he concluded, combat readiness has come to mean in part the ability of the armed forces to "thwart any aggressive attempts to deliver a strike and achieve the decisive goals of war in the initial phase." Colonel P. Trifonenkov, writing earlier in Communist of the Armed Forces of January 1966, imputed even greater importance to this principle when he stated that timely nuclear strikes against the enemy will be a "decisive" factor in the struggle for force superiority. Such strikes, he further contended, can "quickly and radically alter the correlation of forces."

"Thwarting" of an aggressive attack, based upon early recognition of a developing threat, implies a pre-emptive Soviet strike, a possibility which the Soviet theorists discuss only in veiled terms. Soviet strategy is said to be retaliatory, with the Soviet forces held in readiness to deliver a "timely answering blow" to the aggressor. As it is treated in certain statements, however, this formula clearly contains the basis for a pre-emptive doctrine. According to Sokolovskiy and Cherednichenko, for example, in the article cited above, the "answering blow" may not only involve retaliation following aggressive attack, but also the "frustration of the enemy's aggressive plans." The "timely answering blow" therefore might be delivered in response to anticipated enemy attack. The deliberate ambiguity evident in the treatment of this question probably results from the political sensitivity of the question of war initiation. As the Soviet Union's role in any possible

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war is always construed as essentially defensive, the theorists would be constrained from professing a pre-emptive war doctrine.

There is little indication in the public commentary that Soviet views on the efficacy of surprise strikes are based on any very sophisticated targeting philosophy. Expectations regarding this form of attack appear to rest on the general shock effects of nuclear strikes, which would presumably include disruption of command and control and perhaps paralysis of the national will to continue struggle. But some references to the damage-limiting effects of surprise attack suggest that the influence of counterforce concepts is now beginning to be felt in Soviet strategic thinking. Lt. Colonel Rybkin, for example, in the article cited above, observed that the "more decisively and quickly" the imperialist aggressive actions are stopped, "the less serious will be the unfavorable consequences of the war." A more explicit reference to the damage-limiting effects of nuclear strikes was given by Colonel General Lomov, who stated that the ability of a country to resist an enemy nuclear attack depends first of all on how much the nuclear forces of the enemy can be "neutralized or weakened."

Perhaps the most explicit reference to the defensive function of nuclear strikes was provided in an article by Colonel Krupnov which appeared in Red Star of 7 January 1966. Noting the interaction that had always obtained between methods of attack and methods of defense in wars of the past, Krupnov observed that, as a result of the introduction of nuclear weapons, essential changes were occurring in this relationship. Under present conditions, he said, one can observe a "drawing together" of these two main types of combat operations. Now, he said, the function of attack and the function of defense are achieved "simultaneously" by strategic rocket strikes.

Despite the importance which the Soviet theorists attach to the exploitation of surprise in war, they recognize that this factor could not eliminate the threat of retaliation if it were attempted against a power with the strategic capability of the United States. Consequently, military theorists emphasize the importance of strong "reactive" defensive capabilities. Lomov, for example, wrote of the need to insure defense "in the broad meaning of the term," in which he included air and civil defense as well as the above mentioned "blunting" defensive measures. Rybkin, too, emphasized this need, when he wrote of the possibility of developing and producing instruments of war which

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could reliably "parry" an enemy's nuclear strike. What is being argued here, obviously, is that strong defensive measures provided by powerful long-range air and anti-missile systems, combined with a capability to detect and blunt the attacks of an enemy, would go far to compensate for the numerical inferiority in strategic weapons which the Soviet Union now suffers.

These brief indications of the trends in Soviet doctrinal discussion suggest a movement toward certain concepts which have been present in US strategy for some time. These trends thus point to a growing maturity in Soviet theory, a capacity to change and develop as needs and capabilities dictate. They register the unwillingness of Soviet military thinkers to remain tied to doctrines which condemn the Soviet Union to a "second-best" strategic position and which deprive it of the flexibility appropriate to a great power in the nuclear world. More importantly, they reflect the new political environment resulting largely from the escalation of the war in Vietnam and the ouster of Khrushchev. The military establishment no doubt has long believed what it is now setting forth in print; the significant shift is that the political leadership apparently is now willing to have this subject aired because it shares the views of the military.

This is perhaps the principal lesson to be drawn from these discussions, for there is every indication that the strategic explorations that have now begun will be carried forward vigorously with strong official support. There have been intimations that Western research institutions--the Rand Corporation, the Hudson Institute, and the Institute for Strategic Studies in Great Britain being specifically mentioned--have impressed Soviet officials as models worthy of emulation. The call which General Yepishev, as chief of the Main Political Administration of the Ministry of Defense, made at the 23rd Party Congress for greater efforts in the "scientific and technical" analysis of the "character of a possible thermonuclear war" expresses the atmosphere of official encouragement in which the military leaders are now operating, one in which the political leaders are apparently in agreement with the military about the need for revisions in military doctrine.

#### VI. Trends in Overall National Policy

The developments outlined above relate to one side of the policy making process--that is, they described certain of the pressures felt by the Soviet leadership during a period when critical decisions

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affecting the security position of the Soviet Union will have to be made. What effect these pressures will have in influencing future decisions on resource allocations and on the development and deployment of major weapons systems remains uncertain. Thus far, the Soviet leaders appear to believe that they can find ways of avoiding the hard economic choices which would definitely foreclose the chance of achieving one or more of the objectives outlined in the current five year plan.

The new regime's hope of avoiding these hard choices appears to lie in the expectation of an increase in output and in productivity of the economy through better management and planning techniques. The result would be a larger pie to cut among the other major claimants on national resources -- investment and consumption. A key factor in this prospectus, obviously, is whether the international environment will remain sufficiently calm to permit the Soviet leadership to postpone the satisfaction of some defense claims in the interests of achieving a more balanced growth of the economy as a whole.

The evidence of the leadership's views on this question is far from conclusive, but such indications as have been given point to a heightening rather than a moderation of concern over national security. Certainly the Soviet outlook is influenced by the prospect of a continuing US buildup of military strength in connection with the war in Vietnam. Several times in recent months there have been echoes of those regretful acknowledgments regarding the burdens of defense which last year appeared to signal a shift in the regime's policy toward a greater satisfaction of military interests. At the 23rd Party Congress in April, for example, Kosygin conceded that the relatively modest plans that were being projected for the growth of the economy were the result of the threatening world situation. "If matters depended solely on use," he added, "we would surely have made substantial cuts in military spending." Similarly, in his election speech in June 1966, Brezhnev asserted that "expenditures for the army and armaments are a great burden for the budget, for our national economy." Claiming that the Party would like to drop "at least part of this load" from the people's shoulders, he went on to say that the "situation" did not permit this solution.

In sum, the public indicators of leadership attitudes suggest that Soviet policy has moved in the direction of a stronger defense effort. That this effort is large in scope and strong in momentum can be inferred from the statements by the Soviet leaders cited above and from

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the similarity of these statements to others which preceded them approximately a year before. The trends of Soviet policy on the defense issue thus appear to support the implications of the doctrinal discussions analyzed above. This gives grounds for believing that the expectations that appear to be reflected in these discussions--namely, that the material means to support a stronger deterrent posture and a more flexible military strategy are gradually becoming available to the Soviet military establishment--are based not on hopes alone but on confidence that the political leadership is also committed to these same objectives.

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